

A TALK ABOUT RYDAL MOUNT

THE sound of "going—going—gone" has within the last week or two been heard at Rydal Mount among Wordsworth's books and pictures. In a dusty room in the Strand or Piccadilly the tap of the hammer, to which we have been summoned by a fluttering catalogue, is a sound harmonious enough; but in a place which has been advertised as "the haunt of pious memories," it seems to be exactly one of those melodies which "unheard would have been sweeter still." Not that Wordsworth ever cared much for books or pictures, finding the one rather in the brooks that purled down the sides of Fairfield, and the other in the shadows that played along Loughrigg. But somehow there is a petulance in the sound which disturbs our sense of peacefulness, even more than the whistle of the shepherd might the face of old Pan, when that grotesque divinity had dropped asleep in the hot noon. Forty-five years of quiet, however, have folded round Rydal Mount, and nobody ought to complain.

When Wordsworth first settled in the valley, it lay almost as when Gray twenty years before had quitted it; neither native nor stranger suspected it to be a Paradise. The country people liked the continual babble of the brooks, liked their misty hills and meres, but only found out their liking when they were miles away from them. The roads were long and winding and stony, as if they had been made or mended in detached furlongs and roods, as indeed they were along the Rotha, the schoolmaster of Ambleside and his scholars turning out on holiday afternoons to practise mensuration and paving. The Rotha then brawled and foamed over masses of glossy rock, made delicious bends and curves all the leafy way from Grasmere to Windermere. No utilitarian ever dreamed of picking out the stones from their natural bed, and of piling up unlovely walls with them. The dalemen were on good terms with their river, and like the fisherman in Undine did not churlishly forbid it their property. Ferns and lichens and mosses innumerable strewed their russet and golden fringes over the bulging grey rocks. Over Thirlmere the eagle sailed in the blue air, and

the raven croaked from the yew, and the squirrel ran for many a woodland mile along the tree tops. Up hill and down dale, over black Wetherlam and Hard-Knot, trotted the merry file of pack-horses, jingling their weekly bells, as they carried bales from Kendal to Whitehaven.

In expectation, too, of dull November nights, odd kegs of whiskey were snugly hidden under the heather by Derwentwater. In the summer-time, seductive pedlars displayed their wares at the cottage-door, and loquacious clockmakers looked into the farm-houses to set to rights the course of country time; and Benjamin, the waggoner, watered his horses and whiskeyed or genevased himself at the Swan or the Cherry Tree. Occasionally, too, a gipsy's or a potter's tent sent up a blue smoke, or shed a ruddy light under the rain-mottled crags by the Quarry Flats, while the gaunt, half-blind horses cropped the rank grass or whisked away the flies in the glimmering shade. Lonely leech-gatherers were seen on the moors. Little Lucy Grays, and Rutha, and Barbara Lewthwaite crossed the rickety wooden bridges or set their water-mills in the becks, or tried to make their ewe lambs drink in the croft. The shadows of fair-eyed little cottage girls passed under the lych-gates, and rested, after sunset, among the green mounds in Grasmere churchyard. Dozens of white strawberry-blossoms glistened in the crannies of the rocks; daisies cast their wee shadows on the stones; troops of celandines starred the brooks, and hundreds of daffodils "danced in the wind" on the shores of Ulswater. Nobody who lived at the lakes thought these things more than common, or even noticeable. The native poets who composed, as topographical Mr. Clarke tells us, mostly "after supper or on Sunday afternoons," rather celebrated the superiority of the lake beer, as operating upon the souls, and affecting the hue of mortal man, than the excellence of the scenery. The beauties of Rydal and Grasmere, and Derwentwater, were, like the Scotch lakes, uncelebrated and unvisited. There were no remarkable inns which bore the names, which had boarded and bedded, and were under the continual patronage of, illustrious or remarkable persons. There were no gabled boat-houses, nor obtrusive repositories of the fine arts, nor agreeable lounges where visitors were taught the charms of the country; no guides emerged from insidious huts, walked before or behind the unwilling traveller, conveyed him mechanically to the best points, quoted poetry to him, bade him observe what had been said of the geology, chipped off a fragment of rock, or picked up a moss for him; and, finally, protruded their hands for a shilling, in consequence of the scenery.

These contrivances were not yet known. In the vale and on the hill-side all was "peace, rusticity, and happy poverty;" not a trim garden or glaring house was to be seen. Farm-houses of grey slate, shadowed by sycamore or yew, welcomed you with open door, or enticed you to lean over the gate and smell the sweetbriar, and rest your eye on the hollyhocks, the damask roses, and the yellow cornflower. Children in russet caps, or with whips of plaited rushes, might be seen playing about the door: and late in July, and

even in August, the wind would bring you a pleasant whiff from the hay-field. Famous wrestlers and mathematicians got their rudiments of health and learning there, and others who were certainly healthy, if in no respect famous persons. The air and the food were favourable to longevity, and the gudemen and gudewives were not often gathered to their "forelders" before their eightieth, ninetieth, or even their hundredth year.

William Wordsworth, and his favourite sister, took up their abode in a little cottage at Grasmere, December 21, 1779. They arrived after a long, cold journey of twenty miles, the greater part performed on foot, with a few miles of ease, or unease, in an empty cart. The white cottage, with its window darkened by a yew, is still to be seen by the high-road at Town-end, of as humble dimensions as Coleridge's first cottage at Clevedon. Before Wordsworth came to it, it was a public-house, and bore the sign of "The Dove and Olive Bough." Altered as it now is, there remains enough, within and without, to give the place interest. A few stone steps lead into "the plot of orchard ground" the poet once called his own, and of which he said, "my trees they were my sister's flowers." The hills "close us in their solemn shelter," yet the vale is "soft, and gay and beautiful." A hundred yards off lies the lake, with

Its own green island, and its winding shores,
The multitude of little rocky hills,
The church, and cottages of mountain stone,
Cluster'd like stars:—

In the orchard many of Wordsworth's best and earliest poems were written: "The Brothers;" "The Pet Lamb;" "Ruth;" "Michael;" and the magnificent "Ode to Immortality." We cannot help thinking of the visitors who entered through that little cottage door: Coleridge, Scott, Southey, Charles Lamb, Sir Humphry Davy,—in that early and frugal time "inheritors of unfulfilled renown." There, in 1803, Wordsworth, Scott, and Sir Humphry Davy, "clomb the dark brow of the mighty Helvellyn" together; and the austere water-drinking bard recommended his guests to avail themselves of the Swan if they needed stronger potations. In later years the house was occupied by Mr. de Quincy.

Rydal Mount, henceforward an historical spot, became Wordsworth's home in 1813. By that time Mr. Longman's valuer, who estimated the Lyrical Ballads at "nothing," had become aware of his mistake, and, as a compensation for Byron's satire, an appointment of four hundred a-year entitled the poet to respect in the county. The simple Westmoreland folk as little understood the pedestrian who "bood his poetry," as they said, by the lakes and among the hills, as the All-foxden people who regarded him as a smuggler. "Wadsworth's broken loose agen," was the country colloquial opinion of the value of his poetry. Why a stamp distributor should meditate on primroses and talk to himself for hours by Easedale Tarn and along the Brathay, was to the commonsensical agriculturist not easy to understand. Strangers and natives now have inkling,

though perhaps a generation or two must pass before the vicinage quite understands.

No spot so entirely satisfies our idea of a poet's house as Rydal Mount. You approach it by a steep ascent under pleasantly waving trees. On one side is the park wall of a hall, which has belonged to the Flemings ever since the Conquest, and whose oaks were young when the good knights who lie in the ruins of Furness led the Rydal and Grasmere bowmen to Crecy and Agincourt.

Beneath is Rydal church, and the few houses which are called the village; and lower still, though unseen, runs the Rotha, unimproved and still beautiful. Six or seven tall plummy firs wave round the gate, and a wood of evergreen and "ivy never sere" covers the house. A crimson japonica flowers round one window; there waves a laburnum, and a juniper, hung with streamers of gadding rose. The cottage is long and low, and walled in with laurels and evergreens. When we were last there two or three little birds were pecking at the windows, and lifting themselves up on tip-toe, as if to look in.

The room into which visitors were shown was on the left, and from its windows you looked down upon Rydal Lake, its rocky islet and the heronry. From the niche opposite the window, Chantry's bust of Scott faced you; on the side wall hung a Virgin of Raphael's and some small drawings; on the other side a Morland-like picture of a girl with soft brown hair, and a face not beautiful, but full of goodness.

This was the poet's daughter, afterwards Mrs. Quilinan; and for many an hour after her death Wordsworth sat before this picture silently. The inner room was the library. It consisted for the most part of books you could hold in your hand and read by the fire. Many of them were presents. There was a "Religio Medici," given by Charles Lamb; a Chapman's Homer, pencilled over by S. T. Coleridge; a "Marmion," marked with the name of Walter Scott; three volumes of "Political Disquisitions," from Thomas de Quincy to William Wordsworth; a Calvin de Coleridge's; Cato "De Re Rustica." Of course there was Purchas's "Pilgrims," and Collins, and "Choicest Flowers of our Modern Poets," with their Poetical Comparisons, 1200—1600, "Wit's Recreations, containing 630 Epigrams, 160 Epitaphs, and a variety of Fantasies and Fantasties good for Melancholy Humours." There were Randolph's "Muse's Looking Glass," and "England's Helicon," and several volumes of "Causes Célèbres." Some of these volumes and of those often used in the dining-room were bound in cotton, and were playfully called the Cottonian Library. Sir George Beaumont's illustrations of the Ballads hung on the walls.

On the right was the dining-room, a little low dark room, where Wordsworth generally sat, the windows looking to the south and affording a pleasant glimpse of Windermere. Very noticeable was a quaint old-fashioned grate with blue Dutch tiles, symbolising Christ at the Well of Samaria, Jael striking Sisera, and like Scripture subjects. Over the mantelpiece were old line-engravings of Wordsworth's five favourite poets, in this order:

Milton, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and Spenser. Down the wall hung little miniature engravings of Sir R. Inglis, Mr. Poole, Rogers, Wordsworth, Charles Lamb, and Armstrong. Next to them Chantry's bust of the poet, an engraving of Haydon's picture with open collar and bare neck, and some sketches of Sir George Beaumont. Over the old oaken sideboard was a bust of Scott, and near it engravings of the Queen and the royal children, given by her Majesty.

The rarest piece of furniture in the room was an old almetry carved over with circles emblematic of the Trinity and the monogram I. H. S. It bore this inscription :

Hoc opus fiebat anno Domino M.CCCXIV. ex sumtu Wilhelmi Wordsworth filii W. Fil. Joh. Fil. W. Fil. Mich. viri Elizabeth Filie et Heredis W. Proctor de Penyrston quorum animabus propitiatur Deus.

Within reach of the fire-place were Cottonian volumes, and volumes of his own poems, which Wordsworth carried with him, mused over, pencilled, and (unfortunately) altered.

Ascending the staircase, were two pictures of Giordano Bruno, of remarkable tone and beauty; Endymion asleep, with his dogs and hunting-spear; and Godfrey lying wounded, with Armida fondly bending over him; in the blue distance is Jerusalem.

Hush! here is a room which has never been opened for months. Here William Wordsworth died; and here died Mary Wordsworth, in a calm and good old age. The room is of an austere simplicity: on that sofa Wordsworth was lifted out to die: and in a niche close to the window is the cross which blind old Mrs. Wordsworth asked to feel before she died. "Vale, vale, iterumque valete."

Let us pass into the garden, which glossy laurels make all the year cheerful. To the right a terrace leads to an arbour lined with fir-cones and overhung with pines. You pass along a winding walk, and there the little lake shines below in all its beauty. In spring, daffodils light the ground at your feet, and you hear the wild dove "brooding over his soft voice" in the woods below. Below is a garden flush with anemones, and below that a field which bears the name of the poet's daughter. There are the trees which he planted, and his favourite flowers. Over a little pool in which some golden fish were set free, an oak, all knotted and gnarled, hangs. In one of its arms grows a mountain ash and a holly. Everything in the grounds sings of liberty, and a mossy stone records a wish we cannot but echo:—

Time will come
When here the tender-hearted
May heave a gentle sigh for him
As one of the departed.

THOMAS BLACKBURN.